



Mulberry Song 桑歌

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DESCRIPTION

One leap from the city tower thus fulfils the Marquis of Chang Ye's triumph in conquering the world, establishing a new era. Yet she only turns into a wisp of a lone soul, accompanying him day and night.



CHAPTER ONE

Perished country

Half a sky of the imperial city burning in red flames, the gradually accumulation of clouds engulfing that touch of moonlight in the horizon.

Holding up my overly complex skirt, I slowly set foot on the light grey steps of the city wall, walking with great difficulty. I have never liked these sort of overly complicated clothing, unless absolutely necessarily, I would never dress myself in such attire, and even if I do, behind me, there will always be a large number of maids to help hold up the skirt.

But today, there isn't.

There are only soldiers in heavy armours, holding up ice cold spears, stained in blood, their faces expressionless as they hold me in capture, heading up the city tower.

Above the tower are battle flags, fluttering in the wind, having yet to arrive at the top, the cries of women and children are already audible. I step over the stiff cold limbs of a noble lady's corpse, her head and body severed, with resolute indifference, I walk over to where the highest balcony lies.

The stars in the distance were revolving, the clouds rolling past faster and faster. Eyes witnessing a rainstorm soon to approach.

Below the city tower, three hundred thousand soldiers have already encircled the imperial city, blocking all sides, sparing no chance for escape.

With this many people, other than the irritating neighing of the warhorses, I cannot hear any other noise. The night wind carries a bloody scent as it icily hits my face, I free my hold from the skirt, simply allowing it to dance along to the wind. I believe, this wedding gown of endlessly flowing bright red, among this night, should be the most stunning colour aside from the crimson blood.

A frosty sword carrying a bloody stench lines my neck, such coldblooded murder that stains the armour of the man behind, makes my hairs stand on end. He loudly hisses:

“Marquis of Chang Ye, An Zi Wu!”

The three hundred thousand soldiers below the walls submerges into silence. I lower my eyes, masking the look that can be seen in my orbs, looking rather similar to a statue void of consciousness.

“An Zi Wu!” The raging anger of the man behind erupts, “(Imperial) I command you to quickly come out, one minute late and I shall gauge out one of your madam’s eye, one moment late and I shall cut her into a ‘human swine’¹!”

Human swine, removing all four limbs, gouging out the eyes, cutting off the ears, slicing off the nose and tongue, this is still the most favourite punishment of the monarch behind me.

My eyes remain lowered, collecting my thoughts, calming my heart, not letting leak the slightest of expression.

¹ Human swine or pig – rén zhì / 人彘 – a highly cruel form of torture that turns the person into a so called pig.

Chop off all four limbs; gouge out the eyes; drill copper rods into their ears, thus making them deaf; pour poison down the throat and cut off the tongue, destroying the vocal cord, thus making them mute; and then throw them into a latrine to live there. A torture invented by Empress Lu Zhi who performed such torture on Consort Qi.

The troops below grows slightly restless. The majority of them serving under my husband, Marquis of Chang Ye, many of the generals are also familiar with me. Killing one woman is no big deal, but in a situation like this, to brutally kill the woman of the rebel leader, is but a type of deterrent.

Not to mention that above this city wall, there are many other family members of the generals and soldiers, they are all currently sorrowfully weeping. Right now, to kill me like this, is also a way of saying: not long after, they too will be brutally killed in the same manner. These troops have camped out in the outside world for a long time already, longing only for their wives, children and parents back home, should their women and children be killed.....

The emperor's strategy that targets hearts and mind alike, really is viciously cruel.

The stomping of hooves sounds from below the city. This sound is originally very light, yet I am still able to make out the noise. Perhaps because I was once a songstress for a number of years, I am more sensitive to sound, or maybe it's because the horse he's riding 'Long Mei' is one he and I had picked together.

A path pierces through the military fronts, the man on horseback pulls at the reigns, neither rushed nor slow as he appears before everyone's eyes.

Amongst the shrouded night, only the lighting of torches allows me to see an unclear view of his face. Only knowing that his backbone is set very straight, the silver armour on his body, outlining perfect proportions, this is not the first time I've seen him in battle gear, but is the first time I've seen him in battle gear whilst in battle.

Less of an easy-going nature, more of a severe sternness.

The corners of my lips unconsciously traces an arc. That is my husband – – Marquis of Chang Ye, An Zi Wu. Currently the leading commander of the rebel army, about to overthrow the tyrannical reign of the ruling master of this country.

Seeing Zi Wu come out, the emperor behind me is somewhat happy. After all, rumours that Zi Wu and I share feelings that runs bone deep, is known throughout the Capital. They all believe that Zi Wu and I are a pair that will follow one another through life and death.

Follow one another through life and death.

Only I know, this is but an image Zi Wu wants them to see.

“Marquis of Chang Ye, should you be willing to withdraw troops, (imperial) I can show leniency towards your madam, and further forgive and forget all this, continuing to allow you to remain an official in court, loyal in serving my great Qi!”

The humid night breeze rolls up the flags on the city walls, and the person on horseback below, remains motionless in the night wind.

He has not yet replied, but I already know his answer.

He sinks into silence, leaving several hundred thousands to wait for his response.

I tightly clench my eyes shut, enough, to have this moment of deep silence is already enough. Also not a waste of me exhausting so much thoughts into putting on this body of festive wedding gown. In this life, Sang Ge being able to gain this moment of hesitation from An Zi Wu in exchange.....

Is enough.

Thinking to myself: Marquis of Chang Ye, you wanting these thousand li of rivers and mountains, is only lacking in this final step, allow me to help you one last time. Not only to fulfil your ambitions, but also to save you from bearing the notoriety of having a cold heart and iron bowel.

“During Emperor of Zhao’s reign, natural disasters were constant, yet no thoughts to appease the commoners of the world were considered, and instead corrupt officials were appointed, plundering flesh and blood of the people, resulting in times of hardship. In the reigning third year, this

tyrant Xiao Cheng, for his personal pleasure, reduced hundreds of female court attendants to human swine. In the reigning fifth year, dozens of loyal ministers were sentenced to the *frying punishment*². In the reigning eighth year, five massacres occurred in three cities in Jiangnan, causing not a voice to be heard in Jiangnan for three years, countless heaps of atrocities committed! And today, Marquis of Chang Ye is enforcing justice on behalf of the heavens, to eradicate this tyrant, to cleanse this world. Thousands of troops are deployed along the borders, Xiao Cheng, Emperor of Zhao is rendered powerless, what is there to fear?"

"Shut up!" Xiao Cheng's sword traces blood on my neck. He glares at me, overcome with so much resentment, his eyes were practically about to pop out its sockets, yet due to Zi Wu, he dares not to actually kill me.

The sobbing of the women and children on the wall gradually weakens, they are mostly highly educated women, such reasoning I speak of, perhaps if spoken before the commoners in the streets, it would not have much effect, but when spoken to them, they would still be somewhat shaken.

Raindrops slowly falls from the sky, I raise my head in face of the heavens, loudly shouting: "My lord should be tired from leading the troops through day and night, in order to guard the people of our motherland, shedding blood and sweat, fighting with all your might, it is no easy task to come all this way here! Our generation of women, may not be able to stand on the battlefield in substitute of our husbands, to eradicate this tyrant, we also cannot become their burden!"

The women all become quiet for a moment.

"Tyrant....."

"Shut up!"

² The *frying punishment* or *páo lào zhī xíng* / 炮烙之刑 is yet another form of cruel torture, whereby copper pillars were painted with oil and heated with charcoal fire, the offender is then strapped to this pillar and is fried/baked to death.

I still wanted to continue speaking, but was interrupted with yet another thunderous roar, and this time, this voice cannot be any more familiar to me. Every time in my sleep, I would always hear him softly call out my name by my ear: “Sang Ge, Sang Ge.” Such voice, truly is more melodious than that of songs.

I look towards him below the walls, one person one horse, stood amongst the rainy scene. Before him stands the palace walls and my life, behind him are the three hundred thousand soldiers who had fought alongside him to this very day.

I am unable catch a clear look of his face, but is able to hear anger and fear in his voice.

Worried for me?

I smile, Zi Wu, there is no longer the need to now.

After getting married to him, I rarely do things that goes against him, of course I have never enraged him either. But today, I don’t want to listen to his words. Amongst the xi xi su su rain sound, I further raise my voice, this time I did not spit out scornful words of the emperor’s tyranny, but is simply performing my original profession —— singing.

“When is the day of mourning? I and thee’s death.....”

Before the sentence comes to an end, the emperor is absolutely enraged, one sharp blade striking down at me.

I only see one arm attached to a sleeve of gorgeous blood red, fly out. Drawing a curve in the air, falling to the muddy ground.....

At the time, the pain had yet to reach my mind, I cover my endlessly bleeding arm, continuing to loudly sing. Blood and rain alike drenching the wedding gown I’m wearing.

“Shut it!”

“No!”

He and the emperor roars at me at the same time. Emperor of Zhao raises his sword at me in a moment of madness.

Amidst the blurring of my senses due to the pain, I seem to hear Zi Wu screaming out: “Xiao Cheng! If you dare harm her once more.....”

Before he finishes, Emperor of Zhao reveals a treacherous smile, quietly saying by my ear: “Since Marquis of Chang Ye wants to seize (imperial) my country, should he really obtain it, then (imperial) I shall let him obtain it without the pleasure!”

He grabs my hair, dragging me along and knocks me onto the grey steps. At this point, I no longer cared about anything else, the remaining arm randomly clawing at his face. Within a trance, my fingers suddenly felt warm and wet.

Following was Xiao Cheng’s loud cries: “My eyes! My eyes!”

Taking advantage of his moment of panic, I loudly shout out: “Marquis of Chang Ye, is eradicating the tyrant in order to bring peace to the world, Sang Ge to be able to be the wife of the great marquis, has no regrets in this life! Absolutely no remorse!”

Throwing those words aside, with all my strength, my head charges into the emperor’s abdomen. The gown and sleeve fluttering, I along with this tyrannical emperor, falls down from the walls of the imperial city.

Before a person dies, time seems to slow down a lot.

I look amongst the heavy rain, hundreds and thousands of soldiers, everyone sobbing. I see the dark night about to fade and the approaching of the lightning fast “Long Mei”. In that final moment, I see the blood staining his armour and the mournful sorrow in his eyes.

“Sang Ge!”

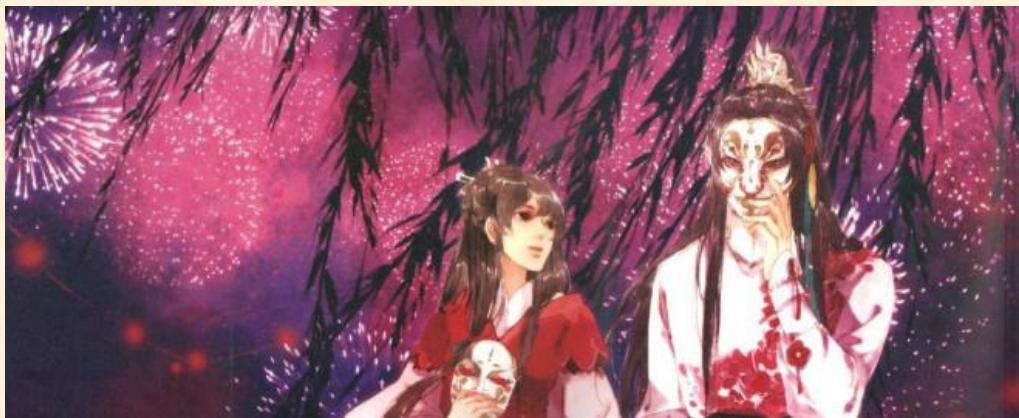
For so many years, I longed for your calling, now, I finally hear it. With the netherworld reaching out, I hear you calling my name, within this heavy rain, yelling till your voice turns hoarse.

Zi Wu, do you by chance remember, our first encounter was also amongst the curtains of rain.

A first encounter amongst the poetic rain scene. At the poplar and willow shore in Jiangnan, under the roof tiles, hazy layers after layers of drizzling rain. At that time I was only a little known songstress, and you were just a dandy, idling marquis.

Met in the rain, knotted for life.

And now, I can finally free myself.



CHAPTER TWO

Festive Lanterns long song

QI PERISHED, the city defences were re-established, with Marquis of Chang Ye – An Zi Wu as monarch, the new reigning era named *Chang Ge*³. Time flows by, in a blink of an eye, it is yet another year of the seventh-seventh festival. I quietly stand by the shore, looking out to the big ship in the middle of the river, currently holding a banquet, I stand there silently, wordlessly.

That's right, I died. Died on the night the imperial palace of the Qi nation was seized, but I have not yet left for the netherworld. It is not that I

³ Long Song

don't want to go down, but because no wardens of the netherworld had come to guide my spirit away, so I can only take on the form of a wandering soul amongst the human realm. The so called —

Ghost.

To qualify being a ghost, one must be subjected to the existence of an intensely strong attachment. I have reflected over this for a long time, but I indeed cannot find anything or place that I am still reluctant to part from in this world. I don't know where I should go, fortunately, I have been following my husband all along.

I watched him ascend the throne, become the emperor, clean up the bloodshed covering the imperial city inside out, then grandly bury me, exceeding the proper ritual an empress should have, a funeral that was practically a national mourning.

I know, perhaps in his heart he can only compensate me in such way. And I am really grateful I was able to see this.

I watch over him, every day in court, during meals, when sleeping. To the point of feeling that this period of time, compared to when I was still alive, I have spent much more time with him than ever before. There is no one able to see me, which means I can freely shuttle to wherever his presence lies.

But today I don't wish to be by his side. Because on an occasion like today, countless singing orioles and dancing swallows are bound to be by his side, with countless fragrant elegance and veiled screens. No matter how open minded I can be, I will still feel absolutely unpleasant. So it is better to hide a little further away, what the eye does not see, is regarded as clean.

The lantern lighting dims a little on that luxurious pleasure ship, painted in joyfulness. The banquet seems to have ended. Thinking of the atmosphere of rouge and power on it, I am still not very willing to go back.

And what I did not expect, after a little while, was a line of people dressed in ordinary clothing, leaving the pleasure ship. That one walking right at the front is precisely my husband of my lifetime, An Zi Wu.

This is emperor incognito.....?

Following by his side are all his trusted confidants, I curiously follow after them.

They head down to the town's night market, on the night of seventh-seventh, the town is brightly lit up, the road lined with shops selling lanterns on both sides, all around are couples walking hand in hand. He steadily walks to the front, choosing to head to the most bustling areas where the crowds are, not even caring for the guards behind, anxious like ants in a hot pan.

An Zi Wu is just a wilful person like this. Still this wilful after becoming emperor.

I follow after him without a sound. He seems to be deliberately trying to lose the guards, walking in several circles around the crowded areas, in the end, he buys a ghost mask to put on, and also buys a lantern, acting just like a man out searching for his lover.

I couldn't resist a little burst of laughter.

Time flies by, the people passing by me all carrying warm smiles on their faces, the little river running through the city is filled with lanterns, carrying phase after phase of either deep or shallow romances as they gently float by.

He slowly walks past the little white stone bridge over the river, one hand holding a festive lantern, one hand hanging by his side. I continue to watch as he turns his body sideways, allowing the frolicking children to run past him, his hand reaching behind, practically giving me the illusion of thinking he wants to hold someone's hand.

After the children had all ran past, he remains standing on the spot, freezing for a moment, he abruptly hooks up a smile, carrying half a trace

of taunting, but within those eyes, there is even more of an infinitely disconsolate loss.

This kind of expression does not stay on his face for long, as he steps off the little bridge, walking up to the riverside, rolling up those wide sleeves, he lights a lantern and places it on the river.

I who was on the other side of the shore, upon seeing this scene, couldn't help but to think back the seventh-seventh festival many years ago in Jiangnan, under the dim moonlight, I said to him: "An Zi Wu, I set off a lantern for you."

"Thank Madam for taking to the trouble." His hands rests behind his back as he gazes towards the lively market in the distance, answering without much care.

I help him neaten out his cloak and tidy his hair, messed up in the wind, literally turning his face towards me: "You're always putting on such a good-for-nothing impression of a wealthy boy in front of people, but I know your heart lies higher than the clouds in the sky, definitely not satisfied with being a mere idling marquis. There will be a day you'd leave the Marquis of Chang Ye Estate in this misty Jiangnan."

His eyes falls upon me, the glimmer in his eyes swirling.

"In my hometown, lights are a harmonious melody, taking on the meaning of remaining behind in waiting. Sang Ge being your wife in this lifetime, towards me, be it real affection, be it insincere feelings, I am still your wife. Should there be a day, you leave. I will definitely wait for you, even if this life is depleted."

His eyelids hangs low, sinking into silence for a long time: "Wait for me then."

Later, I have always been waiting. The Marquis of Chang Ye Estate in Jiangnan moves into the Capital City, every day I wait for him to come back from the court assembly. When he is out in the Xiongnu plains beyond the Great Wall, every night I wait for his triumphant return. He

employs a plot to make Emperor of Zhao send him out the Capital, I thus became a hostage, constantly waiting for his return to collect me.

Later he finally returns, yet along with my waiting.....brushes past my shoulder.

A lively sparkle suddenly flashes past my eyes, along with a tremendous burst of sound, interrupting my thoughts. I raise my head as I look up, not knowing what grand family in this little town is setting off fireworks. Illuminating the night skies with great magnificence.

Everyone else is looking up towards the night sky, a burst of amazed cheers erupts.

I could not help curving my lips into a smile, during every banquet in the palace, there will always be fireworks, grand and luxurious, however, looking at it always make people unable to refrain from sensing an icy coldness, absolutely not as warm and joyful as it is here.

Zi Wu must also feel this way right?

I turn my head to look back at him, but sees his face is not carrying a smile as I expected, and is instead rigidly looking towards my direction, slowly removing the mask from his face.

Within those eyes filled with incredible disbelief, there faintly suppresses wild joy.

In this moment, I ridiculously thought, perhaps he sees me. Silently standing by the riverside, gazing at the him on the other side of the shore, I slowly spread a smile. If not for the slowly floating lanterns following the waves of the river and the beautifully blooming fireworks in the sky, I would have thought time had already stopped.

“Sang Ge.”

He softly, tenderly calls out, one foot stepping into the river water.

In the moment everyone had yet to react to this, he abruptly trickles into the river, pathing his way to where I stand. Knocking over many lanterns along the way.

The guards discovers him, struck with slight panic, they constantly call out from above “Lord!” “Lord! Careful!” He cannot swim, but fortunately this river is not deep, the deepest area just about sweeping past his chest.

Eyes locked onto me, step by step towards me he approaches. With every step closer, the delight in his eyes becomes increasingly hard to conceal.

A sharp sourness softens my heart, my face somewhat unable to withhold the smile.

All of a sudden, with a slip of his foot, his entire person drops into the river. I instinctively step forward, wanting to pull him up, but sensing the water flow directly through my ankle, gently flowing away, I freeze on the spot, motionless.

The guards could no longer care for anything else right now “putong putong” a few of them jumps in, desperately rushing to his side. He struggles in the water for a bit before solidly standing on his feet, the very moment he stands up, those eyes urgently sweeps towards the shore, face suddenly turning pale.

“Sang Ge!” He yells my name in panic, pushing aside the guards who came to support him, staggeringly running onshore, overwhelmed like losing a child, “Sang Ge! Sang Ge.....”

As though other than these two words he cannot say anything else.

I silently listen to him call out to me by my side, looking all around. Whole body drenched, appearing in an absolutely sorry state.

An Zi Wu, since when has he ever been in such sorry state before.....

I lower my eyes, with only a sigh no one can possibly hear.

He is sent on the road back to the palace, overcome with gloom, frightening all the officials to not dare let out a breath.

That night he runs a high fever, his consciousness unclear, mouth repeatedly muttering the same words, the eunuch boldly moves his ear closer, vaguely hearing him mutter “.....song (歌 Ge).....”

His majesty wishes to listen to songs. Stricken with ill health, it's not like he can be out in the wind, the eunuch thus had the songstresses shut outside the doors, leaving them to stand in the cold wind, singing an entire night.

I sit by his bedside, senselessly gazing at him. Only I know he isn't calling for songs, but me. Only I know, what he needs most right now isn't songs, but a peaceful night, a good night's rest.

Yet I'm unable to inform others of his needs.

Midnight, amidst the songstresses' singing, carrying slight tone deaf, Zi Wu suddenly opens his eyes, his eyes somewhat slack, voice hoarse, as he says:

“Sang Ge, I set off a lantern for you.”

Once said, he drowsily drifts back to sleep.

I gaze at him, silently without a word.

An Zi Wu has always been a very healthy person, never does he fall ill, but this round of ill health *bore down on him menacingly*⁴, much more severe than I had thought. Repeatedly dragging on for longer than a month. By the time he just about regained his health, it was already the mid-autumn festival. The palace is to hold a mid-autumn banquet, inviting the Nanyue King. They say that this time, the Nanyue King had brought along his daughter with beauty that overthrows cities. The intention cannot be any more obvious.

Since the establishing of the new reigning era, not only is the empress' seat empty, but also the entire back palace has not a single concubine.

⁴ The original phrase for *bore down on him menacingly* is lái shi xiōng xiōng / 来势汹汹 which more accurately translates to **with the oncoming force of vicious torrents**.

Ministers have petitioned for Zi Wu to select and take in imperial consorts on numerous occasions, but were all brushed aside with the reason of being too busy with the state affairs.

This time, I'm afraid he will be marrying his first woman since becoming emperor.

His woman.....

My fingers slowly traces the outline of his face, finally stopping by the side of his lips. I think, after he marries the daughter of the Nanyue King, I shall go wander off elsewhere. Because he already has another woman accompanying him, awaiting him.

On the night of the mid-autumn festival, with the full moon reigning the sky, the palace banquet hits its peak.

The Nanyue King who occupies the upper left seat, raises his cup and says: "Your majesty, [my] dear daughter would like to offer your majesty a dance."

Zi Wu faintly smiles: "(Imperial) I have heard Nanyue Princess holds peerless beauty, but was never aware princess can actually dance as well. This I shall take a good look at."

Nanyue King proudly smiles, with two claps, a girl whose face covered behind a veil, dressed in a sheer gown of moon white, lightly ascends to the centre stage, with a beautifully delicate figure, she already earns a round of appreciating sighs despite having yet to reveal her face. She gracefully bows to Zi Wu: "Su Er has only inadequate skills."

This voice.....I was instantly stunned, regaining composure, I can only helplessly sound a bitter laugh. Is it the will of heaven, or was it deliberately arranged by the Nanyue King? This I have no idea. Just that, should Zi Wu feel the slightest longing for me, then he would probably marry this Su Er.

Her dancing is not necessarily the best, but such delicate figure is enough to capture the attention of all present.

As the dance ends, Su Er with one spin of the body, originally intending to perform a bow to Zi Wu, but in the end, with a twist of foot, a sound of “ai-ya”, she falls to the ground. The veil floats down from her face, indeed a face of peerless beauty.

A round of amazed sighs suddenly arises from all around.

Several maids come forward to help her up, Su Er with two eyes containing crystal tears, sheepishly glances at Zi Wu, showing it wasn’t her intention. Such tenderly fragile appearance, only makes people want to step forward and pull her into their comforting embrace with loving care.

The Nanyue King very quickly recovers from this sudden situation, standing in bow to Zi Wu, saying: “[My] dear daughter’s incompetence, may your majesty excuse it!”

Zi Wu does not respond to him, only staring dead on Su Er, the look in his eyes unclear. The Nanyue King was not only not angered upon seeing his attitude, but instead loudly laughs: “This little king has heard your majesty has yet to take in a consort since founding the country, and the soil and grain of the land cannot possibly be missing a female master.....”

Not waiting for him to finish, Zi Wu suddenly speaks up: “Does Nanyue King perhaps know of (imperial) my empress?”

“The late empress sacrificed her life for the country, is but a one-of-a-kind woman in this day and age, this little king naturally knows.”

“Since the founding of this era, (imperial) I have always been longing for my empress, every day tossing around for a long time, before being able to fall asleep. Should princess enter the back palace, I’m afraid princess will suffer unjust.” These words of his did not hold a single trace of emotional fluctuation. The several senior ministers familiar with Zi Wu simply continues to lower their heads in drinking, not sparing a glance towards the stage.

Nanyue King believes the emperor has already been shaken by the thought, hurriedly turning to Su Er as he loudly asks: “Do you feel wronged?”

Su Er timidly glances at Zi Wu, cheeks brightly glowing red, she softly answers: “Su Er.....Su Er doesn’t feel wronged.” Nanyue King smiles at Zi Wu, but sees him indifferently place the wine cup down, saying: “But (imperial) I fear my empress will be wronged.”

Once those words were spoken, Nanyue King’s face instantly changes colour. Su Er even more so, turns limp as she falls into the maid’s arms, a pale face staring at the emperor.

Thunder strikes my heart. The land of Nanyue has always been subjected to endlessly chaotic struggles. And today, the Nanyue King has brought his daughter along, intending to make peace through intermarriage, should Zi Wu agree to this, that land shall definitely settle down a lot more in future. Yet he actually.....

“This throne came with the price of the empress’ life, (imperial) I being able sit on this throne every day is all thanks to the empress’ grace.” His speaking tone remains indifferent, yet the words spoken had a group of people’s faces turning ashen, “As long as the emperor is An Zi Wu, the empress shall forever be Sang Ge. Should anyone want to enter the back palace, in accordance to the rules of the imperial family, first go ahead and ask the empress for her consent.”

This year’s mid-autumn banquet, Nanyue King storms out with the whisk of his sleeves, all the ministers remain silent like frozen cicadas, for a while, the emperor alone gazes at the moon scene before telling everyone to disperse.

As the ministers slowly takes their leave, the eunuchs starts to tidy up the mess of the banquet. An eunuch advises the emperor to go back and rest, but is suddenly questioned: “Is that Nanyue Princess pretty?”

The eunuch struck with shock, hastily drops to his knees. Not knowing for what reason the emperor would ask this, he dares not to rashly answer.

The emperor lets out a sigh, mumbling to himself: “Indeed an exceptional beauty, but cannot compare to even a bare minimum of her. She has her own stubborn pride, of course she would not be able to put on such timid and weak appearance.” Having said that, he stands and leaves.

I step onto the centre stage, empty with not a single soul sight, my hand clenching at my chest, under the moonlight, this long stagnant heart of mine seems to have thumped a bit, An Zi Wu said, him not selecting concubines, is in fear of wronging you.

He said, as long as the emperor is An Zi Wu, the empress shall forever be Sang Ge.

I tightly clench at my chest, the noise there sounding just like thunder.

That night, Zi Wu summons a few senior officials. The next day, the senior officials makes a joint remonstration: for her highness *Empress Yong Yi*⁵ who sacrificed her life for the country, his majesty should compensate her grace, never to elect another empress during his reign. A paper of absurd admonition, yet the emperor actually readily agreed to it, even heavily awarding the remonstrating ministers.

Since then, not one person mentions the matter of selecting concubines to the emperor again.

⁵ Empress **Yong Yi** is the title or courtesy name bestowed upon Sang Ge after her death – 永⁶義皇后 – which literally means **Empress of Everlasting Righteousness** or **Empress of Everlasting Justice**.



CHAPTER THREE

Deep Dreams

IN A BLINK OF AN EYE it's the twelve lunar month, the imperial city blanketed in glittering white.

After handling the political affairs, Zi Wu returns to his bedchambers, and I'm here slowly following behind him. These past few days, there have been local reports of increasingly powerful snowstorms in the southern region, he's very worried, unable to sleep for a good few consecutive days. Such is the cause of those bluish-black circles forming under his eyes.

After a while of reading, the drowsiness gets to him, as he lies on the study desk, unknowingly drifting into sleep. How much I want to drape a layer of blanket over him, but can only “want” to.

Outside the windows, is once again the su su sound of descending snow. It is but a very gentle sound yet still manages to wake him. He gazes out the window, and with a sound of sigh, covers himself in a big coat, before leaving the doors. Rejecting the eunuch’s following, he alone holds an umbrella and carries a lantern as he steadily takes a stroll through the imperial palace. His steps leisurely slow, seeming to not have any destination in mind.

With no stars nor moon, an entire sky filled with drifting snow, the areas inside and out of the imperial city seemingly dressed in ominous mourning clothes, and he, carries the light seeming to become the sole colour within this world.

From behind him, I match the rhythm of his steps as I follow, one human one ghost. I think I want to continue accompanying him like this, watching over him as he ages through the years isn’t bad either.

Not sure for how long we’ve walked, he suddenly comes to a stop, silently standing before a set of palace doors. I also follow in stopping, one glance upon raising my head, I couldn’t help sinking into an absent mind.

Su Lu Ge [汎录阁]

Emperor of Zhao, the reigning monarch of the last era upon learning of Zi Wu’s betrayal, later had me confined within the palace. Before my death, my final days were spent staying here, staying here for one entire year. Back then, those past happenings that had me experiencing such pain of being better dead than alive, thinking back to them now, I actually find that the memories are already unbearably blurred, only vaguely sensing slight stuffiness inside, unwilling to remember.

Xiao Cheng was extremely diligent in telling the world how I spend life in the palace, he wants to use my pain and suffering to force Zi Wu into giving up. Yet he has never considered, why would this man with such

vigorously ambitious heart, be willing to give up the world for one woman.

Zi Wu pushes open the heavy doors, one foot treading inside. Seeing the scene inside the courtyard, he appears to be stunned. This place has never been cleaned by anyone, entering the eyes is but a scene of complete mess, time here seems to still be stuck on that night the last reigning era had perished.

With so many rooms within the imperial palace, after becoming emperor, he very rarely comes to the back palace. Nor does he usually show much concern to the internal matters within the palace, every day, the people in the palace will only clean the areas he goes to, so how would they think of cleaning up this place?

In the courtyard, the snow accumulates in thick layers, his every step leaving a deep footprint, walking with slight difficulty. Coming up to the centre of the courtyard, he silently stands for a while, suddenly calling out:

“Sang Ge.”

I instinctively sound a response, but was immediately hit with the realisation, how could he possibly hear my voice?

He alone speaks to himself: “Did you ever call out to me like this also?”

Naturally I have, when Xiao Cheng’s military affairs weren’t going smoothly, he would like to take it all out on me. Every time, the harm inflicted were so unbearably painful, so I would call out his name, thinking back to the misty rain and the Marquis of Chang Ye Estate in Jiangnan, this way the pain will lighten up a lot.

He pushes open the doors and enters the building. Raising the lantern to light it up, inside is filled with dust. Flipped over stools, fallen candleholders, smashed cups, not one thing does not tell of the despair of those days.

I can still remember, a scene of panic inside the imperial city that day, very early do I dress myself in that bright red wedding gown, sitting in front of

the mirror, allowing my personal maid, who was trembling all over, to help me pull up a beautiful hairstyle, just like a readied appearance for a wedding.

And later the soldiers enters, taking away the maid who served me all my life, beating her to death, then captures me to the city tower.



He sits on the dust covered couch-bed. Hand stroking across the quilt that's as hard cold as iron, fingers trembling, he hazily speaks: "Every triumph, will always be accompanied with news of your suffering. Xiao Cheng indeed achieved it, every time I stand on the battlefield, what I think of first is not what good comes from the victory, but what kind of pain you have to endure this time."

A burst of sourness softens my heart. I cannot bear to see such look on his face.

"But where is the path to retreat? The war has already started, striving forth, still contains a glimmer of hope, and should I give up, not even a glimmer hope will be left." His voice is very tightly stretched, carrying hoarseness like sorrow, like pain:

"Sang Ge, yet you were too stubborn to even give me the chance to save you."

I lower my eyes as I silently stand by the doors, such heart like stagnant water giving rise to tidal waves, sour and astringent, also containing that damned hidden warmth.

He sits on the bed, slowly falling asleep. I walk up, kneeling down by his side, repeatedly getting a close look at his face. He's gotten a lot older, among the black there are already strands of white hair, wrinkles also forming at the corners of his eyes. But I still find him good looking.

I silently eye him, as though I could never get enough.

Up until a ray of morning light passes through my body, shining on his face.

His brows slightly knits together, softly sounding a hum. His childish actions draws out a little laugh from me, all of sudden, his eyes open, within his look there still carries the haziness of early waking: "Sang Ge."

"En."

The haziness quickly disperses, he steadily locks his eyes onto me, within that pair of sparkling black eyes, there shows irregular flickering, making me fail to see though his thoughts: "Sang Ge."

"I'm here."

His breathing becomes extremely light, as though afraid of frightening me, expression also becomes extremely tender: "This year's seventh-seventh festival, I set off a lantern for you."

I nod with a smile: "I saw."

"Sang Ge, take me away." These words put me at loss, unable to laugh or cry, I don't even know how to leave myself, how am I to take him along?

And how much abandoning is hidden behind this word 'away', I cannot possibly imagine, just that seeing his current expression, I sense the swelling pain in my eyes as though I'm still capable of crying.

I shake my head.

As though unable to bear it, his voice unravels slight panic: “Are you still angry at me for leaving you alone in the Capital? Are you still resenting me for not coming earlier to save you? That day on the city tower I.....”

“Zhi-ya” sounds, the doors to the courtyard were pushed open. I instinctively lean out wanting to see who’s come, the morning light revolves around my body, and ears suddenly catches the sound of him falling from the bed-couch: “Sang Ge!”

Such panic.

He desperately reaches forward, hand passing through my body, only managing to scoop the empty air into his embrace.

“Not allowed to leave!”

“Don’t leave.....”

I look back at him, only seeing his red eyes, pale complexion.

Lightly letting out a sigh, I close my eyes, unable to bear seeing the dejection filling those orbs.

Outside comes a few eunuchs who came in search of him, seeming to have been frightened by his cry, only after waiting for a long time do they dare take trembling steps in: “Your majesty.....it’s time for morning assembly.”

He fiercely raises his head, the murderous intent in his eyes like a biting chill: “Just now, who opened the doors?”

The three eunuchs all drops to their knees, entire bodies violently shaking, cold sweat directly flowing down. No one dares to answer. The look in Zi Wu’s eyes extremely cold: “Who?”

Finally one eunuch, with a hoarse whisper, says in despair: “It’s.....it’s this servant.” He does not say anything, standing up and walking past the doors, that eunuch had just let out a sigh of relief, only to hear a voice containing not a trace of emotion sound from outside:

“Slow-slice.”⁶

The eunuch's body turns limp, collapsing to the ground.

I lightly sound a sigh, the heaven's will is always fooling with people. I and he are already life and death apart, clearly no longer able to come in contact with one another, why must the heaven's let him see me again?

Why let him suffer the pain again?

Third year of Yong Ge, the emperor is greatly enraptured in Taoist sorcery, gathering sorcerers from across the lands into the palace, with the desire to call upon the spirit of Empress Yong Yi.

⁶ Slow slice or ling chí / 凌迟 – death sentence by dismembering of the body.



CHAPTER FOUR

In The End

TEENTH YEAR OF YONG GE, the emperor falls gravely ill, electing Tai Hao, son of Prince Si as crown prince.

Watching those sorcerers fussily chanting incantations by his side, I just want to vent out my irritations. These Taoist priests, who are nothing more than deceiving mystics trying to play god, I seriously wish I could just reveal my true form and scare every one of them to death.

He has long been lying sick in bed, his body already thinned down to the extreme, the dark circles under his eyes deep, yet every time these Taoist priests comes to chant the incantations, he would still keep his spirits up, watching them complete all those bizarre rituals.

The state power has already been completely handed over to the crown prince. To this day, Zi Wu has not taken in a single consort, with no male heir, he naturally elects his brother's child as crown prince. Fortunately the crown prince holds absolute respect towards Zi Wu.

The strange rituals finally comes to an end, the sorcerers all withdraws. He is already extremely exhausted, closing his eyes to rest.

I sit by his bedside, silently gazing down on his face, the sourness in my heart unbearable.

Zi Wu, Zi Wu, why put yourself through such suffering?

What honour Sang Ge has, to receive such longing from you.....

“Your majesty.” A senior eunuch very lightly calls out to him, “Your majesty, Crown Prince is here.”

He slightly stretches his eyes open, lightly nodding. The eunuch thus invites the crown prince in.

“Imperial uncle, is your body feeling any better?”

Zi Wu shakes his head, helplessly smiling: “Isn’t it still the usual, how are the state affairs?”

“Everything is well at peace. Hao-er visiting today, is to inform uncle of great news.” Zi Wu grows interested, raising his eyes to look at him, Tai Hao cheerfully says, “Not long ago, when Grand Secretary Xiao Yi was in Tachun, at the outskirts of the Capital, he ran into Reverend Tai Xu! Xiao Yi thus invited Reverend into his estate as guest. This person is but the grand master of metaphysics, should we invite him in, then uncle you.....”

Zi Wu waves his hand, smiling as he says: “What reverend, what grand master? Can the amount of reverends and grand masters that’ve come to the palace these past years be considered little? It is but an empty title, nothing more than fakes, deceiving mystics trying to play god. Hao-er should not believe it.”

Tai Hao is stunned: “But does uncle not believe it?”

“Believe?” Zi Wu’s one laugh brought along a round of coughing fit, the surrounding people busying to feed him water, after a very long time, does he finally settle down, looking out the windows, saying, “It is but a ray of obsession that cannot be put down. Always fearing when it’s time I go down, she has not waited for me. Always wanting to get a little look of her now, only then would my heart be at ease.”

Tai Hao hesitates to speak: “Then Reverend Tai Xu, to invite or not invite?”

Zi Wu after a moment of silence: “Invite.”

That next day, I see this Reverend Tai Xu. Divinity running bone deep, what’s more important is, I can sense an overwhelmingly strange air shrouding his entire being, inducing the fear in me, thus not daring to stay close. As soon as he enters the grand hall, I could only sense a pressuring force, pressing down on me to the point I couldn’t breathe, having no choice but to hide outside. I watch them through the windows.

That Reverend Tai Xu does not perform a grand bow upon seeing Zi Wu, only nodding his head lightly. Zi Wu is not bothered by it either, allowing the eunuchs and palace maids to all withdraw to the outer hall.

“Old priest I, hears your majesty has indulged in Taoist sorcery for many years.”

Zi Wu’s pale lips tugs up a little: “[I’m] but only clinging to one person.”

Reverend strokes his long long white beard: “The empress?” Zi Wu’s eyes instantly sparkles, steadily staring at him. Reverend smiles, saying: “Should it be the empress, she’s right here.” Once spoken, his beaming smile directs towards me.

My heart clenches, but sees Zi Wu also look over desperately, his expression filled with nervousness, he does not see me.

“You can see her? You can see her?” Zi Wu keeps on asking, “Is she well? Is she still waiting for me? Is she.....is she.....” Following on, he actually grows so overwhelming anxious, that he does not even know what to say.

My eyes were overcome with absolute swelling pain, should I still be able to cry, I would already be choking back my sobs.

The old priest looks me over, saying: “The empress has been swallowed in severe attachment, thus become a ghost. Should she still not relieve her soul and reincarnate, I’m afraid she will be confined to the human realm for eternity, reduced to an evil spirit.”

Severe attachment?

Since when did I have a severe attachment? My eyes turn to see Zi Wu, struck with the sudden realisation, so it is not that had no attachment, but because being overly attached, I have actually let go of self-importance. Attached to An Zi Wu, persistently awaiting him. Awaiting him through the aging years, standing by him, watching over him.

Zi Wu upon hearing Reverend Tai Xu’s words, freezes, asking: “How to relieve?”

“With no attachment left, without relieving, can also reach reincarnation.”

“What attachment does Sang Ge have?”

“This, your majesty will have to ask yourself.”

Zi Wu once again freezes, mouth softly whispering the two words “severe attachment”, abruptly dumbfounded: “She’s waiting for me, she’s indeed waiting for me.” The exhilarated joy in his words difficult to conceal.

Reverent Tai Xu leaves with a smile.

That night, Zi Wu’s bedchambers has not one person guarding it, I stand under the plum tree in the courtyard, silently gazing at the hazy moon scene.

The breathing of the person inside the chamber grows a little heavier, I turn my head back, and sees him quietly leaning by the window, those features lit with a warm smile. Just like the very first encounter amongst the misty rain in Jiangnan.

I a forsaken songstress, he a dandy marquis, beautiful like the dreamlike first meeting.

The plum blossoms behind in full bloom, the descending of petals like pink snow paving the land.

“Sang Ge.” He says, “I’m home.”

On the third month of Yong Ge tenth year, the emperor passes away.

END

Translator Notes

Finally after a decade of waiting, a decade of longing, the two are finally together.

I love how after all this time, there is nothing else to be said in that precious moment other than that one phrase of “I’m home”. For Zi Wu, after all that worrying of whether she is still waiting for him, also those questions of panic, and the explanations he wanted to ease her ‘anger’ with in chapter 3, he spent seven whole years trying to reach out to her again, just to get another little look of her, and thanks to the reassurance from the godly Reverend Tai Xu’s words, he comes to realise she is still the Sang Ge who was always waiting for him, so all that was left for him from that very point, was only to return to her side, to finally end her waiting. As for Sang Ge, she has watched over him this entire time, and has personally seen his devotion to her alone. No words are needed to tell her how much she actually means to him, no words can exceed the devotion he has displayed throughout his ten years of reign. And so, with those very words coming from his lips, she really could not ask for anything more. Because all along, this is all she wanted, to be able to wait for him to return to her.

Actually, Zi Wu’s “**I’m home**” sounds so much more softer and sweeter in Chinese (**wǒ huí lái le / 我回来了**) the more accurate translations would actually be “**I’m back**”, but excuse me for changing it to a less accurate translation, because I personally found it sounds a tad too comical this way, all I could think of was The Terminator when I typed it

out at first – talk about ruining the mood

So I took it upon myself to

change it to “I’m home”, hoping that it sounds sweeter in its own right...only by Sang Ge’s side is Zi Wu at home

.....either way, please understand this little alteration haha, but if anyone has any ideas for a better way to put it, I will gladly accept your suggestions ^_^

Also I just noticed that the author first introduces Zi Wu’s country as **Cháng Gē / 长歌** which means **long song**, but in chapters three and four, the country or the reigning era seems to be called **Yǒng Gē / 永歌** which means **everlasting song**. Yong Ge is definitely the more meaningful name, not to mention the more auspicious name for a country too, but both are named after Sang Ge anyways – a homage that represents Zi Wu’s everlasting love, longing and gratitude towards her, such that would continue to be passed down through generations, even if a day comes when Yong Ge perishes, this reigning era that had once existed would still continue to go down in history, as will the story of the empress whose noble death lead to the rise of this era, and the emperor whose undying love for her lead to a lifetime of longing, a lifetime of remarkable devotion, with not a single woman setting foot in his back palace throughout his entire reign...this in itself is a godly feat considering the hundreds of concubines that occupies the back palace back then, but of course such devoted emperor only exists in fiction haha

Well~ it’s been one hell of a short rollercoaster ride, with endless shedding of tears along the way, but I’m very happy to have shared this wonderful story with everyone and I do hope you all had a wonderful time reading as I did with translating it ^_^

Next time, I promise I will pick up a more comedic story, and make up for all the tears with plenty of laughs

Thanks for reading!